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### Thomas Carlyle's Laystall and Charles Dickens's Paper-Mill

**Citation for published version:**

Inglis, K 2011, 'Thomas Carlyle's Laystall and Charles Dickens's Paper-Mill', *Carlyle Studies Annual*, vol. 27, pp. 159-76.  
<[http://literature.proquest.com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R04725393&divLevel=0&area=abel&forward=critref\\_ft](http://literature.proquest.com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R04725393&divLevel=0&area=abel&forward=critref_ft)>

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

Carlyle Studies Annual

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

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## Thomas Carlyle's Laystall and Charles Dickens's Paper-Mill

KATHERINE INGLIS

"Paper is made from the *rags* of things that did once exist;  
there are endless excellencies in Paper."

Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution*

THE QUESTION OF INFLUENCE IS ALWAYS CONTENTIOUS, especially if the influenced author has admitted the debt. As Charles Dickens wrote to Thomas Carlyle in 1863, "I am always reading you faithfully, and trying to go your way" (*Letters* 10: 233). In analyzing this claim, Dickens's critics have assigned particular importance to Carlyle's influence on the development of his politics, late style, and vision of social change, particularly in the novels most often described as "Carlylean."<sup>1</sup> Michael Goldberg has concluded that Dickens's late fiction exhibits an analytic, ambitious form of social criticism informed by Carlyle's portrait of a diseased, corrupt society (8–12). Always eager to identify and to mock examples of injustice, Dickens learned from Carlyle how to extend his indictment to include unjust systems. And when critics explore Carlyle's presence in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), Dickens's last completed novel, their tendency is to find Carlyle's later writings, particularly *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850). An assessment by Michael Cotsell is representative: "*Latter-Day Pamphlets* may

<sup>1</sup>The novels most often explored critically for the presence of Carlyle are *Hard Times*, *Bleak House*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*; see Michael Goldberg and William Oddie.

have weakened Carlyle's standing with many literary figures, but the notes in these pages confirm what other commentators have suggested, that Carlyle's influence over Dickens remained strong. Indeed, the imagery of dung-heaps and scavenging in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* makes it the closest of Carlyle's writings to *Our Mutual Friend*" (*Companion* 7).

For Cotsell and many others, Dickens's constancy to Carlyle in the 1850s and 60s is reflected in the novel's pessimistic vision of a sick, disconnected society. What Dickens takes from Carlyle, it seems, is what Goldberg describes as "animus" towards "money-worship" garnished with "literary detail" derived from the *Pamphlets* (7). Dickens's elaborate, sustained analogies of a society defined by dirt and suffocated by Parliamentary cloacæ reflect the strident tone and excremental imagery of the *Pamphlets*, just as from its gleeful evocation of Britain as Augean stable, Dickens develops his novel's organizing metaphors. There are evident parallels between the symbolic register of scavenging imagery in the *Pamphlets* and in *Our Mutual Friend*; however, placing emphasis on the *Pamphlets* as a primary source provides an incomplete picture of Carlyle's influence on Dickens's novel. Influence rarely works in a straightforward manner, particularly when it is mediated by as eccentric an imagination as Dickens's. Brian Maidment, discussing *Our Mutual Friend*'s strangely anachronistic portrait of Nicodemus Boffin, the Golden Dustman, notes that "the novel evinces a particularly Dickensian, and particularly compelling form of cultural nostalgia" (204). An equally striking anachronism in *Our Mutual Friend*, one that also can be classed as a kind of willful cultural nostalgia, occurs as Dickens of the late 1860s resurrects the Carlyle of the 1830s. This reading revisits *Our Mutual Friend* by way of *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34).

It is probable that Dickens read *Sartor Resartus* in the 1840s, the decade in which he met Carlyle; it is certain that he had read it by the time he wrote *Our Mutual Friend*, for he makes explicit reference to it in his *Household Words* essay "Where We Stopped Growing" (1853). However, the importance of *Sartor Resartus* in shaping the thematic and formal properties of *Our Mutual Friend* has received comparatively little critical attention, in part perhaps because the influence of Carlyle's later work is so apparent. Barry Qualls, for example, whose analysis of Carlyle's influence on Dickens is one of the few to consider the relevance

of *Sartor* to the late fiction, effectively reads *Sartor* through the filter of the *Pamphlets*. Qualls emphasizes the Carlyle of 1850 who saw Britain as a fetid swamp and who taught Dickens to see the same. Looking back to *Sartor* with attention to its doctrine of anti-mechanism, Qualls suggests that Teufelsdröckh's rage against Mammonism and the worship of Respectability was the inspiration for *Our Mutual Friend*'s portrait of Podsnappery: a society in thrall to mechanism and surfaces (210–15). Though important as a detailed analysis of Carlyle's influence on the novel, by reading *Sartor* through the *Pamphlets*, Qualls underplays the fascination with renewal expressed in both *Sartor* and *Our Mutual Friend*. Waste and scavenging are as central to the thematic and formal concerns of *Sartor* as they are in the *Pamphlets*, but they are configured differently, with waste figured as paper in *Sartor* rather than as the excrement of the *Pamphlets*, and scavenging as a form of industry, rather than a method of purification. Simply put, *Our Mutual Friend* owes as much to the vision of scavenging articulated in *Sartor* as it does to the version that dominates the *Pamphlets*. Specifically, *Our Mutual Friend* imagines material and spiritual renewal through the literal and metaphoric operation of its paper-mill, a critical site in the novel that has received little critical attention.<sup>2</sup> By demonstrating the plurality of meanings attached to paper, particularly to waste paper, it is possible to complicate further the critical understanding of the novel's thematic structure.

Dickens's paper-mill is the physical reflection of a vision of renewal, one that owes much to Teufelsdröckh's vision of society as laystall. The laystall of *Sartor Resartus*, like the paper-mill of *Our Mutual Friend*, is a fixed point around which rags, paper and people circulate, from bookshop, to dustheap, to rag merchant, to manufacturer, in an unending cycle of de- and re-composition. More than simply its synonym, "dustheap," a laystall is a site for the depositing of refuse prior to its sorting

<sup>2</sup>One important exception is Richard Altick, who reads the prevalence of paper as the "physical reflection" of Dickens's interrogation of popular education and literacy (237). Altick's study, however, ends where this one begins, with the symbolic function of printed matter. For Altick, the novel's allusions to print are "period color rather than commentary; their function is sociological, not symbolic except insofar as they are connected with the theme of education" (253).

and distribution, and as a metaphor, a laystall suggests both stasis and metamorphosis. Laystalls were urban landmarks that underwent constant internal reorganization. The status of the two sites within their respective texts is slightly different in that Carlyle uses laystall as a symbol for society, albeit a vividly realized one, whereas Dickens's paper-mill serves as both a location in the world of the novel and the figurative center of a complex network of connections described through the circulation of rags and paper. Emphasizing *Our Mutual Friend's* connective tissue offers a way to understand the novel's representation of mutuality that runs counter to the conventional critical stress on Dickens's representation of failures to connect. For example, pointing to the absence of mutuality in modern society as a Carlylean theme, Cotsell suggests that the title of *Our Mutual Friend* refers not only to Rokesmith/Harmon, the putative mutual friend, but also to the decline of mutuality itself (*Companion* 15). But both Carlyle in *Sartor* and Dickens in *Our Mutual Friend* use the process of manufacturing paper from rags as an organizing metaphor, one that aligns a vision of production born from decomposition with social, spiritual, bodily and moral renewal. It is from Carlyle's laystall that Dickens develops *Our Mutual Friend's* mythos of waste, in which one recognizes mutuality in the all-encompassing scavenger economy that emanates from the mill.

Critics usually focus on two organizing metaphors in *Our Mutual Friend*: the river, and the dustheaps. The lexicons of fluidity and of dirt dominate the novel and inflect the characterization of all things, yet unlike *Bleak House* (1852–53), where all metaphors meet in the fog of Chancery, the world of *Our Mutual Friend* remains separated out into its constituent parts. Critics have emphasized its society's internal disconnectedness. J. Hillis Miller, for example, contends that in contrast to *Bleak House*, *Our Mutual Friend* does not put its “dispersed world back together.” For him, the novel rejects an “ideal unity of the world transcending the differences between individual lives” that is perceptible from the perspective of the narrator or Providence. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Miller continues, “there is no unifying center” (292). Nancy Aycock Metz builds upon Miller's reading, observing that “because the perspectives in [*Our Mutual Friend*] are diffuse” the novel's

small victories remain “self-contained” and discrete: if each individual is a circle, then “there is no suggestion that such circles will ever intersect to form a coherent universe” (60). Instead of resolution and coherence, for Metz, the novel’s “preoccupation” is “with method and process” (61) enacted in the small triumphs of individuals who reclaim order from disorder through imagination. These arguments about the entropic direction of the novel’s universe and its articulation of resistance to entropy through the reclamation of waste need to be qualified by the acknowledgment that *Our Mutual Friend*’s circles, centers, and metaphors do intersect at the paper-mill. The apparently disconnected elements and metaphors of the novel are points on a cyclical route traversed by goods and by people, a route that when traced describes an economy defined by the recovery and utilization of discarded fragments and scraps.

Carlyle uses such an economy as a recurring metaphor for society in *Sartor Resartus*. The laystall (and the scavenger economy that depends upon waste) offers Teufelsdröckh an image of society and an opportunity to make sardonic comment on the excessive “exuberance” of contemporary literary production. Teufelsdröckh professes to find consolation for the excess of printed matter in the employment it affords:

If such supply of printed Paper should rise so far as to choke up the highways and public thoroughfares, new means must of necessity be had recourse to. In a world existing by Industry, we grudge to employ Fire as a destroying element, and not as a creating one. However, Heaven is omnipotent, and will find us an outlet. In the meanwhile, is it not beautiful to see five million quintals of Rags picked annually from the Laystall; and annually, after being macerated, hot-pressed, printed on, and sold,—returned thither; filling so many hungry mouths by the way? Thus is the Laystall, especially with its Rags or Clothes-rubbish, the grand Electric Battery, and Fountain-of-Motion, from which and to which the Social Activities (like vitreous and resinous Electricities) circulate, in larger or smaller circles, through the mighty, billowy, stormtost Chaos of Life, which they keep alive! (34)

Teufelsdröckh describes the engine of literary production as

a perpetual motion machine, one that serves as the source, fuel, and destination of all things that coalesce and degrade. The delicious paradox of the passage relies upon the inversion of the received understanding of the relation between rags and literature: here, literature is waste; rags and clothes-rubbish are the valued commodity. To a degree, Carlyle's satirical image reflects historical reality. As production rates in paper manufacturing rose in response to increased demand, technological advances, and reductions in taxation, the demand for rags outstripped supply. To alleviate the shortage, rags were collected from textile factories, householders, and rag dealers, and imported from Germany, Italy, Russia, and Austria.<sup>3</sup> For much of the nineteenth century, the paper-trade was a victim of its own success, unable to satisfy the ever-increasing demand for its products, limited by the absence of a commercial alternative to rags, and pressured by its increasingly efficient manufacturing methods. In early 1868, a paper-making company run by one Charles Culliford Boz Dickens and his brother-in-law Frederick Evans failed.<sup>4</sup> Yet the paper trade's efforts in finding alternatives and reclaiming waste material succeeded in increasing productivity, the success of which Carlyle's laystall metaphor renders grotesque.

In Teufelsdröckh's vision, the "exuberance" of paper exceeds the human appetite for print. The industry of the scavengers who picked the 5 million quintals of rags might have been beautiful (or not: Teufelsdröckh's question is heavy with irony); but the end product of that industry, the excess of printed matter that threatens to choke public space, converges with the classic definition of dirt offered by Mary Douglas as "matter out of place" (35). This definition, as Tom Crook has shown, is a Victorian formulation, deriving from optimistic, utopian schemes for the reclamation of human waste (202–03). According to Douglas, however, dirt is "the byproduct of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, insofar as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (25). Teufelsdröckh's vision of printed matter overwhelming the thoroughfares seems closer to this anthropological definition

<sup>3</sup> See Richard L. Hills, 119–36.

<sup>4</sup> See Claire Tomalin, 371.

than to the Victorian formulation outlined by Crook. For Teufelsdröckh print is rejected as the unregarded by-product of the laystall system. In the circular economy Carlyle's hero describes, the movement of print from thoroughfare to laystall, to paper-mill (where it is macerated), to printing-house, to shop, and back to laystall, is, notably, uninterrupted by reading. According to Teufelsdröckh, the product of the laystall is "printed on, and sold,—returned thither" (34). Carlyle's punctuation extends the irony of the passage; a wry dash marks the absence of thought in the unending cycle of literary production and destruction. Print is sold and instantly returned, apparently unread, to the laystall. In this ironic vision of Society as dustheap, the writer is figured not as a creative, imaginative being, but as a "dust-making, patent Rag-grinder" and "a moving Rag-screen," whose "film, . . . frayed away by tear and wear, must be brushed off into the Ashpit, into the Laystall" (44). Literature, print, paper, rags: they are merely material, merely dirt.

As a satiric instrument, Teufelsdröckh's voice sounds contemptuous, his perspective Olympian; however, in later contradictory fragments assembled by the rather befuddled Editor of his biography, waste figured as rags becomes the potential origin of renewal: "The withered leaf is not dead and lost, there are Forces in it and around it, though working in inverse order; else how could it *rot*? Despise not the rag from which man makes Paper, or the litter from which the Earth makes Corn" (55). Teufelsdröckh admonishes against despising detritus, the rag from which paper is made, for through work, form can be brought from fragments, as nature can bring life from litter. In this more optimistic vision of the laystall, society, though doomed to decay and decompose, has in its doom the germ of its regeneration. In the "Fire-Whirlwind" of the World-Phoenix, Teufelsdröckh promises, "Creation and Destruction proceed together; ever as the ashes of the Old are blown about, do organic filaments of the New mysteriously spin themselves" (180). For the Professor of All Things in General, renewal and decomposition are related, the one depending upon the other, occurring in the same space, at the same time. Dickens realizes this vision of simultaneous de- and re-composition in *Our Mutual Friend*.

There remains, however, a critical difference between the



two texts, in their attitudes towards their own forms. Both articulate a vision in which composite forms bear the marks of their disorderly origin, which is reflected in the structure of the works themselves. Both thematize the act of creation as composition, but they differ significantly in their representation of the compositor's method and artistic creation. If *Our Mutual Friend* is enchanted by the method of the compositor, *Sartor Resartus* expresses uncertainty towards the integrity of the work formed through composition. Compositors produce literature from scraps, in defiance of disorder, which raises the question of whether or not the products are undermined by their very hybridity. Teufelsdröckh's promise that order shall emerge from chaos is partly fulfilled in the composition of his biography, assembled by its frustrated Editor from a chaotic jumble of fragments. Rather than an orderly archive, the Editor is astonished to receive "Six considerable PAPER-BAGS, carefully sealed," marked with signs of the zodiac, within which "lie miscellaneous masses of Sheets, and oftener Shreds and Snips" (59). In the bag marked Sagittarius he finds "fragments of all sorts; scraps of regular Memoir, College Exercises, Programs, Professional Testimoniums, Milk-scores, torn Billets, sometimes to appearance of an amatory cast; all blown together as if by merest chance" (84). From this "imbroglio" the Editor attempts to sift order, a literary dustman searching for "Biographical fact" from dreams, anecdotes, incoherence (59), and only to the best of his questionable ability.

Reclaimed from the imbroglio, macerated, printed on, sold, *Sartor Resartus* is the self-reflexive, composite product of the laystall society it describes. The Editor's method is of course, as George Levine has recognized, "analogous to the readers'" (62), but it is also that of the laystall scavenger. In elaborating a treatise on Dandyism from a "defaced stray sheet, probably the outcast fraction of some English Periodical" used as waste paper, Teufelsdröckh employs the same technique. From this fragment (an excerpt from Edward Bulwer-Lytton's silver-fork novel *Pelham*), Teufelsdröckh reconstructs seven articles of Dandyism. Baffled by this "Dandiacal Body" discerned from waste, the Editor imagines the frustration of *Sartor's* less persistent readers: the Professor's "irony has overshot itself; we see through it, and perhaps through him" (210). Giving voice

to suspicion of compositions reclaimed from decomposition, he perhaps reflects Carlyle's own ambivalence towards *Sartor*'s form as a serial publication.

*Sartor* began life as "Thoughts on Clothes," an article for *Fraser's Magazine*, but Carlyle peremptorily reclaimed it when he determined it had the potential to become a book. But the book, having the misfortune to be presented to a series of London publishers during the furor over the Reform Bill in 1831, would not do, and had to be re-presented to James Fraser as a last resort. Lacking a manuscript, it is impossible to do more than conjecture what revisions would have been required to transform the manuscript for serial publication; bearing that caution in mind, Rodger L. Tarr detects signs of alterations that refute Carlyle's "teasing claims . . . that he did not revise," extending to reorganization, addition of chapters, the insertion of references to the magazine and its fictional editor, and the reworking of material to accommodate the new intervals between numbers (*Sartor* lxviii–lxxiii). Carlyle's declaration to Fraser that "I have determined to slit it up into stripes and send it forth in the Periodical way" suggests that he saw the editorial work required to turn a book into a serial as an act of destruction (*CLO*: TC to James Fraser, 8 May 1833).

In contrast, Dickens put the constraints and interruptions of serial publication to good use. A well-known example of his flexibility in utilizing the serial form is his last-minute introduction of the Mr. Venus plot in *Our Mutual Friend*, when he found himself in need of padding for the end of a number. Prompted by the novel's illustrator Marcus Stone, Dickens visited the shop of a taxidermist and articulator of human anatomy in search of material. Delighted by the eccentric collection of objects and the morose shop boy, Dickens quickly wrote up his experience as Silas Wegg's visit to Venus in search of a different class of material, his own amputated leg. The immediate length problem solved, Dickens wove the taxidermist and his art into the plot and symbolic structure of the novel.<sup>5</sup> Taxidermy and the articulation of human anatomy are obvious correlatives of Dickens's concern with the indeterminacy of life and death and with the separation of objects into their constituent parts. Yet

<sup>5</sup> See Cotsell, "Mr. Venus."

the scenes were a late addition, written in at the last moment by an artist who, like Venus, was able to make much from little. The difference between Dickens's opportunistic creativity and Carlyle's lament for his mutilated creation is striking. *Sartor* remains ambivalent towards the scavenger's method of composition: from within the fire-whirlwind, it is the engine of renewal; but from Olympian height, the activity of sorters and compositors (and readers and editors) generates only activity, not meaningful change. *Our Mutual Friend* never ascends to Olympian height. Its perspectives, including that of the narrator, remain human and limited. From the human vantage point, the composition of mosaic creations from fragments and waste can be a powerful expression of agency.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, as in Teufelsdröckh's vision, life and creation depend on the circulation and re-composition of refuse. Bodies are reclaimed from the river. Dust is sorted at the dust-heaps. Venus slowly constructs a "lovely compo-one" from "the Miscellanies of several human specimens" (496). His affectionate name for his skeleton-in-progress draws attention both to the hybridity of the creation and to the nature of his method. A master of composition, Venus follows in the creative tradition of the Editor and of Teufelsdröckh, both of whom compose from fragments. The lovely compo-one exemplifies the vision of form that permeates the novel, a vision that looks back to *Sartor* in its emphasis on the mutability of form, the circulation of fragments, metamorphosis, and the simultaneity of decomposition and re-composition. These attributes, distributed across the apparently disconnected plots, coalesce at the paper-mill, which sits by the still unpolluted Thames on "the borders of Oxfordshire" at the edge of an unnamed village (530). Dickens renders it through fragments: the smoke from its chimney, the light that shines from its windows, its clean storeroom, the exemplary village where its workers live. In contrast to the dustheap and river, the industry of the mill remains invisible, represented only through allusion. Dickens had written an account of an 1850 visit to a paper-mill with Mark Lemon in which they described the various processes involved in paper manufacture, from the transformation of rags to the weighing of the finished product. But Dickens's portion of the article, its introduction, emphasized not

industry, but imagination. He proclaimed paper's pacifying influence, and anticipating his re-use of the metaphor in *Our Mutual Friend*, the rural setting of the mill. Making reference to *As You Like It*, he declared: "Now, there are indeed books in the running brooks—for they go to feed the Paper-Mill" (529). *Our Mutual Friend*'s mill recalls this industrial pastoral, standing in opposition to the putrid city and its gospel of Podsnappery. Yet the mill is also the point at which the city's disconnected symbols finally intersect, the river provides the mill's driving force, the dustheaps its raw materials. The mill serves as connective tissue, linking characters, symbols, and economic structures. At the mill, the twin symbols of the city are renewed and redeemed.

Initially, Dickens figures waste paper in terms equivalent to Teufelsdröckh's first vision of the laystall, as matter out of place:

That mysterious paper currency which circulates in London when the wind blows, gyrated here and there and everywhere. Whence can it come, whither can it go? It hangs on every bush, flutters in every tree, is caught flying by the electric wires, haunts every enclosure, drinks at every pump, cowers at every grating, shudders upon every plot of grass, seeks rest in vain behind the legions of iron rails. (144)

The streets of London are overwhelmed with excess paper. Whereas Teufelsdröckh's vision describes the movement of paper from waste to product and back to waste, in this passage Dickens's narrator asks where London's paper comes from and where it goes to, but he offers no answer. Over the course of the novel, however, the existence of a scavenger economy emerges, which Dickens reveals through glimpses of the reclamation and the circulation of real and metaphoric waste paper and rags. This world surfaces in Silas Wegg's fantasy that the dustheaps contain lost wills, in the myriad accounts in Boffin's character books of the recovery of misers' property from waste, in the reclamation of Harmon's will from the dustheap, and in Fledgeby's discovery of valuable "queer bills" in the package of debts he had dismissed as "waste-paper" (423). The extent of the scavenger economy can be charted in Lizzie Hexham's progress from river scavenger to paper-mill overseer. Pamela Gilbert has made the important observation that Dickens's

late novels can be “quite specific—even fussily, journalistically so—about locations” (95). In relation to *Our Mutual Friend* she points out “a new edge to his precise delineation of characters’ itineraries,” the precision of which she identifies with the rise of thematic cartography in the mid-century (81).

To map Lizzie’s progress is to follow a course charted by the rag trade. Her first home is an abandoned mill in the heart of the port of London. Ports were crucial to the British paper trade. Although the percentage of paper made from imported rags declined between 1830 and 1859, it was in the context of a dramatic increase in paper output: the total amount of rags imported for British paper-mills in this period actually rose. Between 1860 and 1863, the weight of rags imported solely for the use of paper making increased from 16000 to 20000 tons per year. From the port, rags would pass either directly to the paper-mills, who employed their own sorters and cutters, or to rag dealers (Hills 131; Simmonds 9). Lizzie moves into the circle of a rag dealer. She substitutes one mill for another, taking lodgings at Millbank in the home of Jenny Wren, a dolls’ dressmaker who transforms rags into beautiful clothes for small ladies. Through Jenny, Lizzie meets Riah, who sells Jenny “damage and waste” at the cost of “two precious silver shillings” per basket (280). Riah is part of the chain that moves reclaimed rags from ports, laystalls and households to the paper-mills that need them so desperately. Through Riah, Lizzie is introduced to the managing partner of the paper-mill, who shares Riah’s Jewish faith. This introduction establishes a new center in the novel, from which point the metaphor of the laystall emanates outward. From Lizzie, and her base in the mill, destruction and creation proceed together; a dense network of connections, forged of death, rebirth, and the scavenger economy, coalesces around her. Lizzie’s crucial role in forging connections is demonstrated in her connection to three deaths and one rebirth, all framed and inflected by rags and paper. The death of Mr Dolls, who betrayed Lizzie by revealing her sanctuary in the mill, proceeds as disintegration from animation into rags. The death of Betty Higden in Lizzie’s arms generates a flurry of papers and new connections. The attempted murder and reformation of Eugene Wrayburn, the dandy who uses Dolls to find Lizzie, brings new life from destruction, coherence from

rags.

"The End of a Long Journey," the chapter that ends with Betty Higden's death, begins with a reference to the *Latter-Day Pamphlets* that contrasts the steadily shrinking dust heaps of Boffin's Bower with the ever-increasing detritus of government: "My lords and gentlemen and honorable boards, when you in the course of your dust-shovelling and cinder-raking have piled up a mountain of pretentious failure, you must off with your honorable coats for the removal of it, and fall to the work with the power of all the queen's horses and all the queen's men, or it will come rushing down and bury us alive" (503). It is with the vision of scavenging forged in *Sartor*, however, that the chapter ends. Having fled her home to escape dying as a claimant on the Parish, wandering without direction like the mysterious paper currency that blows through the city, Betty finds sanctuary of a kind in the shadow of the mill. She does not seek relief from care, but relief from a bad death and a worse funeral. It is significant that Dickens stages her death in the environs of the paper-mill, for it incorporates her, like Lizzie, into the laystall's redemptive process of destruction, creation and connection. Her last moments are occupied with the sighting of the mill, and the arrangement of a concealed letter to which she attaches great importance: "Her strength held out to enable her to arrange the letter in her breast, so as that it could be seen that she had a paper there. It had held out for this, and it departed when this was done" (512).

Discovered on the brink of death by Lizzie, Betty's principal concern is that she read the paper, a letter that names her friends. Although the importance that Betty attaches to the letter is unexplained by the narrator, she may be using it as a kind of insurance against becoming the "unclaimed" property of the anatomists. Betty's paper preserves her from the kind of decomposition that was dreaded by the poor after the Anatomy Act of 1832 made the bodies of the unclaimed available for dissection.<sup>6</sup> In death, she is treated as paper, not as rags, and fit to be preserved, not processed. Lizzie and the managing partner arrange for the "remains to be placed in that sweet, empty store-room of the mill" (516), where they are kept safe until she

<sup>6</sup> See Ruth Richardson.

receives a Christian burial. If Dickens associates Lizzie with the circulation and metamorphosis of rags, he aligns Betty with the end of that journey, the transformation into paper. Always proud of her love of newspapers, laid out in the paper-mill's store-room, Dickens heavily identifies Betty with paper. She is preserved by the paper in her breast, she is protected by the manufacturers of paper, she is stored as paper, and she is buried in the shadow of the paper mill. Betty's death draws together the novel's disparate strands. Her letter summons mourners to the mill, thereby introducing Lizzie to Rokesmith/Harmon and Bella Wilfer. In turn, Lizzie establishes a link between these two. Summoned to work and leaving them alone, "it fell out that she became the unconscious means of bringing them together" (517). She is a subject of mutual interest that forces the conversation that leads to reconciliation.

A second letter also brings reconciliation, albeit by circuitous, fatal direction. As with Lizzie and Betty's journeys, it is worth tracing this letter, for its value and outcome are also part of the network of the mill. Eugene Wrayburn, Lizzie's would-be seducer, discovers her sanctuary in the mill with the aid of Mr. Dolls, Jenny Wren's father, who intercepts a letter between Jenny and Lizzie. By paying Dolls to obtain intelligence of Lizzie, Eugene provides him with the means to drink himself to a terrible public death. A fit of the "horrors" succeeding a fit of the "trembles" in a doorway, pelted with rubbish by children and soaked with water by a publican, the degraded man dies fighting against an imaginary conspiracy, "rendered a harmless bundle of torn rags" (730) strapped to a stretcher. The first outcome of the intercepted letter leads to a death and a metaphoric rendering into rags. The second causes Eugene to join Lizzie at the mill, where he is ambushed by Bradley Headstone. Eugene's ordeal is the counterpart of Dolls,' in that it is marked by bodily disintegration and the ubiquitous rags, but it is also the counterpart to Betty Higden's demise. He is attacked on the same bank where Betty found shelter, and he is paralyzed, as she was. Lizzie had gently raised Betty's "old weather-stained head . . . as high as heaven"; the same moment in Eugene's drama is rather more violent: Lizzie seizes "the body . . . by its bloody hair" and drags it to her boat (514, 700). When he enters the water, Eugene is overwhelmed by the

language of the laystall, specifically, by its defining attributes of maceration, rags, and metamorphosis. Lizzie is able to find his body because she detects “torn fragments of clothes” on the river bank where he fell, and after reclaiming him from the water, she binds his mutilated form with rags (699). Finally, Lizzie extends the same gesture of charity to him that she had to the disfigured Betty in her last moments, a kiss.

Only Jenny Wren can understand the fragmented speech of the disfigured man. No explanation is offered for Jenny’s ability to interpret Eugene’s utterances; the logic of appointing her as translator exists only in the dense metaphoric connections established between the recycling of scraps and the process of mutilation and reformation being undergone by Eugene in his sickroom. The transformer of rags proves able to patch together fragments of speech. The logic is the same that led Silas Wegg to enlist Venus to sift the dustheaps for waste paper. The qualifications of Venus are “skill in piecing little things together . . . knowledge of various tissues and textures . . . the likelihood of small indications leading him on to the discovery of great concealments” (303). Critics have observed that Jenny and Venus share a function, with that function characterized variously as that of the artist, and that of the detective.<sup>7</sup> Detection and artistry overlap in the work of the compositor. Both the taxidermist and the dressmaker are master scavengers and figurative compositors who are accomplished at sifting and transforming both literal and metaphorical refuse.

The nexus of these connections—the mill—is also the site of the most remarkable of the novel’s resurrections. As the mill-wheel turns, and with Jenny in attendance, working at transforming rags to dresses, Eugene undertakes a task of extraordinary spiritual, moral and bodily renewal. Able to speak only in fragments, Eugene nevertheless communicates, through Jenny:

His eyes were fixed again, and the only word that came from his lips was the word millions of times repeated. Lizzie, Lizzie, Lizzie. But, the watchful little dressmaker had been vigilant as ever in her watch. . . . “Hush!” she said, with her finger on her lips. “His eyes are closing.

<sup>7</sup>See Nancy Aycok Metz and Albert D. Hutter.



He'll be conscious when he next opens them. Shall I give you a leading word to say to him?" . . . She whispered in his ear one short word of a single syllable. (741)

The word is "Wife." Macerated, mutilated, reformed, Eugene seeks to make reparation to Lizzie. "Despise not the rag from which man makes Paper," advised Teufelsdröckh: and I would suggest that it is in this spirit that Dickens brings his novel to a close, with his focus equally on the rag and the paper, each being expressions of the other.

In Eugene, the degradation of Dolls and the triumph of Betty are combined, generating reformation from destruction. Allusive of Teufelsdröckh's vision of renewal, Eugene's reformation exemplifies the intimate relation between death and rebirth.<sup>8</sup> Rather than describing alternation of potential and destruction, or progress from decay to fertility, Dickens in *Our Mutual Friend* follows Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* in insisting on the interpenetration of potential and decay. Composition bears the imprint of decomposition, and decomposition resolves into composition. Within the scavenger economy, rags, scraps and paper occupy the same space, in the same time. Those touched by that economy, both literally and metaphorically, possess the same indeterminacy. Form thereby becomes a matter of perspective. As in Teufelsdröckh's insistence that creation and destruction proceed together, Dickens's elaborate overlaying of fragments onto form serves to pair creation and destruction as twin forces. In celebrating the work of composers and the triumphs of the paper-mill, Dickens recalls the vision of *Sartor Resartus*, selecting from its dense imagery and mythos of renewal an imaginative reply to the disconnectedness and mechanism of Podsnappery.

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<sup>8</sup>Metz's argument that Dickens's representation of chaos is particularly relevant here. In her estimation, the universe of the novel sets its characters in a state of continual encounter with entropy: "[D]isorder . . . is postulated as the very condition of their existence. They live surrounded by artifacts in a perpetual state of coming-to-be and of disintegration. Chaos—now perceived as pure potential, as fertility, now rendered as the principle of destructiveness, of decay—is the medium within which they work and out of which they daily evolve and reaffirm their sense of self" (70).

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